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Intended for parents, the booklet (part of a 10 booklet series on talented and gifted education) discusses how parents can counsel their gifted or talented child. Some tips for effective counseling are presented, focusing on such things as observation, listening, accepting, and making suggestions. The question of when a parent should counsel his or her gifted child is considered. Some helpful attitudes a parent can have toward giftedness are described, touching upon such issues as being different, the responsibility of using one's ability, and having others appreciate one's achievement. A list of sources of information on the talented and gifted is also provided. (DLS)

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Counseling Your Gifted Child

COUNSELING THE GIFTED CHILD

Alfreda Ebeling

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Oregon Association for Talented And Gifted

Oregon State DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

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FOREWORD

The Campfire girls giggled with excitement as the paper bag made its rounds. The game was one of their favorites; putting on a blindfold and trying to identify an object selected at random from the treasures in the sack. It was soon seven-year-old Janie's turn. Janie, who was tops in the classroom, was unable to guess what item she felt so several of the other girls taunted, "What's the matter, Janie? I thought you were so smart!"

On the way home, just when traffic was the heaviest, Janie told her mom how upset she was. Her mom considered what to do: Suggest talking it over later? Promise to call the leader and tactfully ask her to be a little more alert to developing manners in the girls? Or, try to find out why Janie couldn't identify whatever she touched and practice the game at home so she could do better next time?

Discarding all those ideas, she commented, "It's easy to get mad when you think someone is laughing at you. I see how you could feel that way, Janie. What did you do when they said that?"

"I said, 'shut up!' in my head."

"Did that make you feel better?" asked Mom. Janie laughed, agreeing that it did, and went on to report on the other meeting activities.

For Janie, being a happy gifted child is not always easy. Sometimes a little extra coping ability is

needed. Janie, like many other gifted children, is developing adequate strengths to cope because she has parents who can counsel effectively.

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WHAT IS COUNSELING?

Counseling is a helping process, concerned with personal development, through which an individual can gain insight and discover the most effective way to act in various situations.

A gifted child tends to take in emotional information at the same rate as general information, because of sensitivity to stimulus, good memory and powers of observation. Due to these heightened sensitivities the gifted child often needs a little more help in dealing with everyday situations. The child may be a baby who screams in fright at the sight of an ant, a grade schooler who takes personally every reprimand given to the class, or an older child who has not learned to overlook certain nuances in tone of voice of expressions of others.

HOW CAN A PARENT COUNSEL EFFECTIVELY?

Counseling is an on-going process where the parent effectively uses the skills of observation, listening, accepting and making appropriate suggestions. Appreciation of the child as a person, not just as a gifted child, is vital. Prerequisites to counseling success are a warm, sharing relationship, one in which the parent and child respect each other; and a willingness on the part of the parent to be flexible with both place and timing--since parental counseling rarely takes place while two people are seated comfortably at an appointed time.

OBSERVATION

Know the child; reactions, sensitivities, physical needs, preferences, whatever will be useful in helping to guide and to counsel. Accurate observation will often enable a parent to anticipate a counseling situation. It may be, "Oh, oh. John's dad is bawling him out without listening to his ideas about the experiment first. I know what will happen next!" Knowing what the child is like will also help the parent make appropriate decisions during the counseling process, such as considering: "Should I treat this as a real problem, or is Ann over-emotional because she's tired from staying up for the party?"

One parent may want to just note things mentally, while another might prefer the accuracy of a written record, answering questions such as "What is Ann's sleep pattern?" Writing a profile of the child, to be given

on a birthday years later, is another way of noting observations. Parents may wish to compare observations and interpretations with each other or with a teacher to check for accuracy.

LISTENING

A gifted child's mind works in an intriguing way. If a parent's mental set is delight in anticipation of what comes next rather than a "what now?" irritation, the interest will be real and the skill in effective listening will increase automatically. The ability to listen includes questioning and commenting on feelings so the parent can identify the concern. The parent understands so well what the child is saying that when it is rephrased for the child the parent is rewarded with, "That's it! That's just what I mean!"

"What now?" can easily be a parent's first thought on occasion, and there are certain circumstances when it's all right not to give the child the attention desired. Knowing the child helps identify an emergency situation, when attention must be given. Otherwise, when the driving is hazardous, the cookies are burning, or the parent is very upset for some reason it is best to avoid resentment by admitting to the child you are unable to give him (or her) your attention. It may be put, "I'm sorry. What you have to say is really important to me, but I'm distracted right now and can't listen well. Can you wait a bit?"

One parent liked to set a timer for her smaller child on these occasions, saying, "When the bell rings in five minutes you will have all my attention." Another successful approach is to always, as soon as possible, let the child know you are ready to listen. Because it's easy to forget during a stressful moment the parent may need to jot a quick reminder note.

ACCEPTING

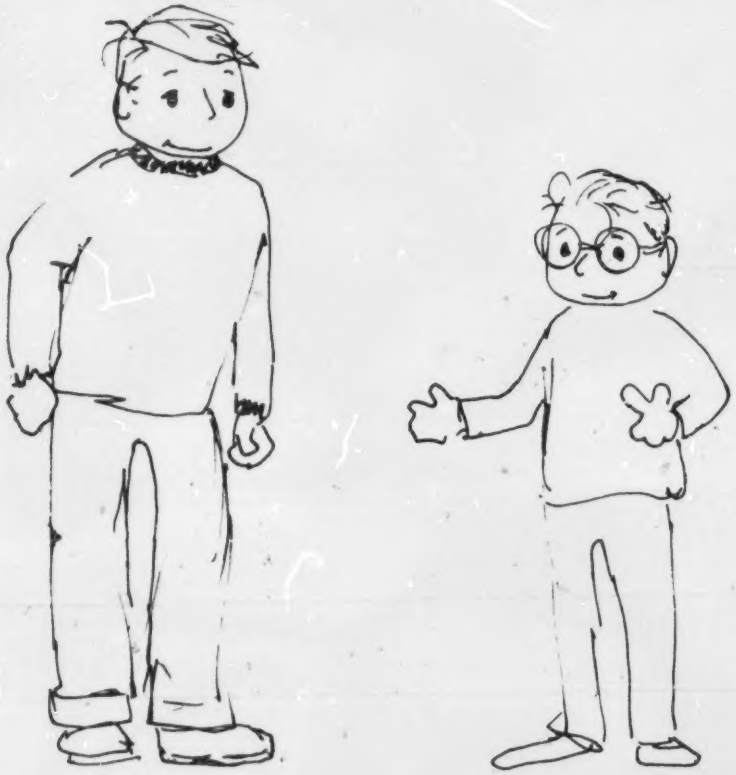
A parent can counsel most effectively when acceptance of the child's concerns and feelings becomes a basic part of that parent's nature, even when the parent can't understand why a child feels a certain way. It means to acknowledge the child's feelings as being real and legitimate at that moment. Janie's mom, in the opening example, may think: "That's a silly thing to be upset about, but it's important to Janie." Her words to the child are supportive. When a parent can avoid: "That's not worth crying about," and "You shouldn't feel that way," a basic attitude of acceptance is developing, and the skill of using non-judgmental and accepting words will follow.

MAKING SUGGESTIONS - SOMETIMES

Having the ability to make suggestions wisely means a parent must be alert to the needs of the moment; whether there is an immediacy to the problem, whether the child doesn't have enough information to come up with useful suggestions or whether the parent thinks the child is really missing possibilities.

Going back to Janie and the Campfire incident again shows that it isn't necessary for the parent to say what is felt or thought. No suggestion was made, but Janie's mom, away from a traffic situation, may bring up the incident again as a lead to further discussion. An opening might be "Janie, what are the different things you can do when you think someone is making fun of you?" If Janie's ideas don't include merely laughing it off, Mom may want to suggest it. Being a good listener and accepting the child's ideas will avoid the trap many parents and teachers fall into, that of having a hidden right answer in mind. To increase the skill of making suggestions wisely the parent can keep a tally of what was suggested and why.

The record will show if the parent was too hasty with ideas or if they were unnecessary. The parent can also ask the child to comment on the outcome of following a parent's suggestion.



WHEN SHOULD A PARENT COUNSEL?

There are three conditions when a parent should be ready to counsel. One is when the child has a concern, such as shown by "Dad, why doesn't the teacher ever listen to me?" Another instance is when the parent has been told about a problem, exemplified by "Marge, your teacher wants me to discuss what happened at recess today." The third occasion is when the parent has a concern. Maybe it's something like, "Jerry, I've noticed that Keith always quits when you go out to play the game."

However, some gifted children, particularly the very brilliant, the handicapped or the underachieving, may have psychological problems which require professional help. If the pressure to be constantly superior has become too much and the child has given up altogether, if the child feels too crushed too long after a defeat, if there is obvious difficulty with social relationships, if frustration has resulted in completed merging into the group, daydreaming constantly, apathy, cynicism or hostility, it may be time to look for outside help. A parent should seek help, no matter what the problem, if it has gone beyond the child's and parent's abilities to cope alone.

Sources of help are qualified school personnel, county mental health clinics, individual psychiatrists and family service organizations.

WHAT ARE SOME HELPFUL CONVICTIONS?

The parent's attitudes toward giftedness make a difference in the child's feeling toward giftedness. The gifted child is more likely to grow up with the ability to enjoy giftedness, put it to a responsible use, and grow in social maturity when certain convictions are incorporated into the parent's and child's own value systems.

BEING DIFFERENT CAN BE POSITIVE

Bobby stood before his dad, picture in hand and tears in his eyes. "Everybody laughed at it, Dad. No one ever saw a big kite and a tiny boy, and it was supposed to be a real picture." "It's real, Bobby, and very imaginative. I never would have been able to think of drawing that way. It makes me feel like I'm up in the sky, like a bird, close to the kite. I see the string go a long way down, to a very far away boy. Is that you down there?"

When the child's nature or circumstances decree a <u>different</u> reaction, a parent can try to develop an acceptance and appreciation of the unique thought or action. Few great leaders, thinkers or artists come in tandem.

BEING GIFTED DOES NOT MAKE A CHILD BETTER THAN OTHERS

"Dad, I think every kid in that school could get A's if they worked hard enough." "Do you really, Son?

Remember how hard you worked on the high jump last year? You were doing your very best but you just couldn't go any higher. Somehow minds are limited like bodies are."

"You mean I really am better than all those other guys?" "Smarter," said Dad, "different that way. Not a better person necessarily. Remember how we've talked about what makes a good person or a good citizen? Neither of us ever put intelligence at the top."

A gifted child is unique in a very special way, but neither the child nor the parent is deserving of the gift, or necessarily a finer person because of it.

COMMENDATION RIGHTLY COMES WHEN A GIFT IS USED WELL RATHER THAN WHEN POTENTIAL IS DISCOVERED

Neither the junior high nor the high school had offered art as an elective, but somewhere along the line Joan had developed an enthusiasm for trying something new. "Guess what," she told a friend after completing an evening art course. "I can paint! All those years spent learning anatomy and chemistry - I had no idea I had any artistic ability! It's really fun!"

Sometimes, as when someone buys or admires a painting, the rewards for Joan are obvious. Most of the time, however, the greater reward is the satisfaction she receives as she creates.

The parent here is challenged to encourage the child to discover, to risk, and to experiment, knowing that enjoyment and feelings of accomplishment are likely to result. A tendency to avoid is the overscheduling of the gifted child's life with lessons or group meetings. The parent must be willing to allow the child to abandon a project that is not enjoyed, while giving praise for at least giving something new a try.

Ask questions like, "What happens if ...?" Encourage something never done before, like writing a story or acting in a play. Help the child experiment, perhaps beginning in the kitchen. Talk to adults who have recently discovered abilities they've probably had for years.

The parent's goal is to help the child learn that trying a new experience can mean fun, growing and learning, no matter what the outward benefits are.

CERTAIN PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS ARE CONCOMITANT WITH RESPONSIBLY USING ONE'S ABILITY

Each gifted child is different from other gifted children. There are, however, common characteristics which are helpful in developing responsible use of giftedness in all areas. These are appreciation of excellence, realistic expectations of self, dependability and self-reliance.

"What a well written letter Uncle Jim sent! It's a funny letter to read and every word is spelled correctly; I can just see him missing that airplane flight," or "Have you noticed how beautifully Mrs. Adams keeps her garden? Not a weed to be seen!"

Whenever something is well done, point it out to the child. Avoid praising shoddy work; a gifted child tends to lose respect for an adult who indiscriminately praises. With encouragement and guidance, gifted children can soon become their own best critics, appreciating the positive as well as being aware of what needs improvement.

"George, I'm sorry you fell just at the end of the race. I know how you feel. It's really hard not to do as well as others when you're used to doing better, but life would be so dull if we were perfect all the time.

We all have bad days; that just can't be helped. You can always be proud of yourself whenever you know you did your best. Besides, lots of times just having had fun is enough."

A parent, such as Janie's mom in the Campfire example, can help develop the child's sense of humor about imperfections. A parent's job is to encourage them to realize that excellence can exist without perfection.

"I know you don't feel like going to Cubs, but the leader has to go and it's so discouraging for him to plan for boys who come only when the mood hits them." The parent can help the child want to be dependable by noticing and commenting when a promise has been followed through, as, "Mary, how wonderful to come home and find the dinner started. I had completely forgotten you said you would take care of it on Tuesdays!"

Consistently setting an example of dependability, and guiding the child early will make that child more appreciated by others as an adult. Whether the gift is a talent for performing or problem solving, it won't be utilized if a reputation for undependability precedes the individual.

"Dad, the teacher told us about a violinist who had to stop in the middle of a concert to tune one of the strings. At the end he received a standing ovation! I sure would have gone to pieces at the time." "Would you, Brian?" said Dad. "I remember even when you were little you coped with problems very well. The first day we lived in this house you got lost walking home from school. Remember how you managed? And once at the PTA meeting you kids had to start the skit over when the record was off. Everybody makes mistakes, but not everybody can cope with the results or learn from them like you do." "Gee, thanks, Dad. But you've sure helped. You never make me feel up-tight like Joey.

His dad always points out every mistake and makes Joey feel that no matter what he does, afterwards it's going to be wrong. Joey doesn't even try anything new anymore."

When self-confidence is fostered, the gifted child is more likely to become self-motivated and self-reliant, sure that coping with any situation is possible.

APPRECIATION OF ACHIEVEMENTS BY OTHERS IS IMPORTANT

"Dad, I lost. David's handwriting was chosen the best in the class," said Donna, with a crestfallen expression. What does a parent do or say? Take advantage of an opening to discuss how other people can do things well, too, and if David's sample wins the grade competition, Donna can share in the achievement because they are friends from the same class. Because most gifted children are imaginative and sensitive they can be quite successful at sharing feelings, good as well as bad. Developing empathy is a long-term process but along the way it helps a child to mature in the handling of personal defeats. The attitude of the parent is crucial; if Dad is going to be upset and jealous because Donna wasn't chosen first it follows that Donna is likely to be upset and jealous.

SOME TRAITS OF GIFTEDNESS MAY HAMPER RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHERS

One trait of giftedness is the tendency to become irritated when others don't understand. A parent may hear, "I'm not going to play with Jack anymore. He never understands anything I say." The parent can encourage the child to restate and rephrase, emphasizing that, "Jim, the responsibility to make yourself clear is yours."

Another trait is the dislike of inaccuracy. To some gifted children, having everything accurate is more important than social relationships. When Joyce complained at home about how angry her teacher was when Joyce told her "responsible" was spelled wrong her mom commented, "Joyce, do you remember when you were telling me something important yesterday and I interrupted you to correct your grammar? You got pretty angry, and that's how a lot of people feel when mistakes are pointed out. Sometimes it's better to overlook inaccuracy." "I know," said Joyce, "but I feel it's so wrong I can't help it." "Well," continued Mom, "if you must do it, maybe we can talk about ways to do it without antagonizing, like watching your timing, or saying, 'Mrs. Stanton, is responsible spelled incorrectly?' instead of 'you spelled a word wrong.'"

A third trait of many gifted is a quick sense of humor. Often it's delightful, but people are put off by a person who's forever making quips, especially if the person is continually distracting or making personal references. An observant parent can help the child feel what it's like in the other person's place. This is a good time for the parent to initiate role playing, which all children love and gifted children are especially able to learn from.

A gifted child's sense of integrity may demand that correctness rule over relationship. Or, the quest for perfection may result in very high expectations of others. Because these characteristics can be very constructive the wise parent won't try to change the child; rather, the child needs to learn to see the fine line between constructive and destructive social actions.

Counseling a gifted child results in growth and encouragement for the parent as well as for the child.

It's an on-going process where the child, too, learns to observe, listen and accept.

In the moments when a parent tends to despair because "I can't remember everything I'm supposed to do," it's good to know that effective counseling is based on values and convictions which become ingrained, requiring no conscious thought after a while.

A wise parent will relax and enjoy the child, knowing that the most important thing is that someone loves and understands the gifted child as an individual.

SOURCES OF INFORMATION ON TALENTED AND GIFTED

Association for the Gifted (TAG)
Council for Exceptional Children
1920 Association Drive
Reston, Virginia 22091

Bob Siewart, Specialist for Talented and Gifted
Rod Meyer, Center for Program Coordination
Oregon Department of Education
Salem, Oregon 97310

ERIC Clearinghouse on Handicapped and Gifted
1920 Association Drive
Reston, Virginia 22091

National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC)
217 Gregory Drive
Hot Springs, Arkansas 71901

National/State Leadership Training Institute on Gifted/
Talented
316 West Second Street PHOC
Los Angeles, California 90012

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